

The Hudson's Bay Company and Mr. Julian Ralph.

BY ARCHER MARTIN

EVERY Canadian, or at least every Northwest Canadian, who takes an intelligent interest in the history of his country, will gladly welcome every contribution from the pen of any one at all qualified to write on the rise and progress of that great company which gave its name to, and is so inseparably bound up with the vast plantation of Rupert's Land; that is, so long as such contribution possesses the qualifications of originality and accuracy. If it does not possess the first of these requirements it is tedious and unprofitable as a literary production; if it lacks the latter, then it is not only valueless but distinctly harmful from any point of view.

Even a cursory consideration of a recent article in *Harpers' Magazine*, for February, entitled, "A Skin for a Skin," by Mr. Julian Ralph, shows that it is open to both the above objections.

So far as regards the first, it may be dismissed shortly by saying that Mr. Ralph has drawn almost exclusively and in an injudicious manner on the well-known Parliamentary Reports of 1749 and 1819, to which he refers, and jogging along this much travelled track, has nothing new to present to readers who are at all familiar with the subject.

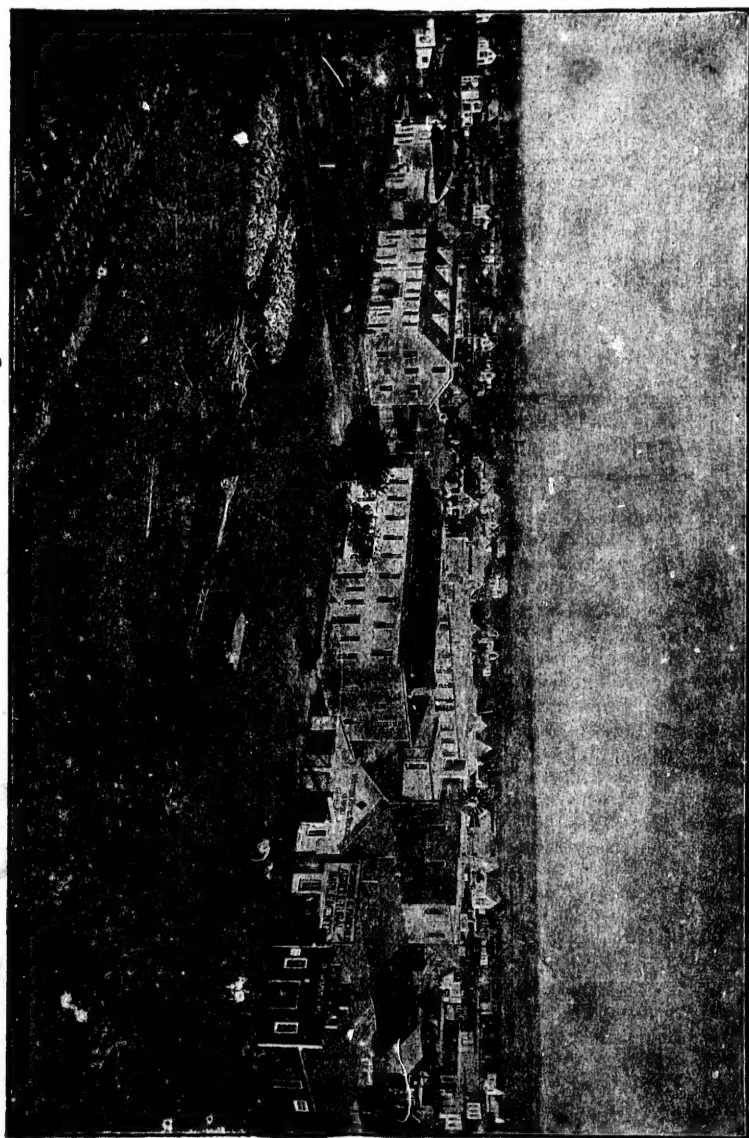
The article, in many respects, much resembles one entitled, "The Romantic Story of a Great Corporation," which appeared a little over two years ago in the *Cosmopolitan*, and was written by Mr. J. M. Oxley. The illustrations, from the facile pencil of Mr. F. Remington, as a whole are excellent, though it is evident from the foxy and ragged curs depicted on page 381 as huskey dogs, that the artist is not familiar with this fine animal; and from the truly wonderful canoe on page 393, that Mr. Remington is more at home on the plains than he is on the lakes and rivers of Rupert's Land. The illustrations in the *Cosmopolitan* are of more permanent value, as they represent actual places of interest.

As regards the second of the essentials above referred to, Mr. Ralph is still more unfortunate. He begins by stating that the "head offices of the great corporation" are in Winnipeg, instead of London, and ends by transforming the old friend of the *voyageur*, the tump-line, so known to "Webster's Unabridged," into "tomp-line," which is a stranger to us. Passing over the incorrect description of the armorial bearings of the ancient company, what shall we say of the unhappy reference to Johnny Crapeau (!) on page 380, or the delightfully unconscious manner in which the writer persistently speaks of the *courrier (sic) du bois*, instead of the *coureur du bois*, all through his paper? Had he glanced at Washington Irving's charming "Astoria," or the *Cosmopolitan* even, he would not have committed this inexcusable error.

Historically, he errs from the beginning, for though in the report of 1749 he had a copy of the Company's charter before him as he wrote, yet he gives the date of it as 1672 instead of 1670, May 2nd; nor is he apparently quite sure of the date he *does* give, for on another page 392, he fixes the present age of the Company as 230 years, which would make the date of the grant of the charter 1662, or eight years worse than before. Mr. Oxley, at least, got this important date correct in his article. Nor is he more reliable when he says that the charter was given as a reward for efforts made, and to be made to find the North-West Passage. This was only one of the causes for the grant, which goes on to say, in the quaint language of the day, "and for the finding of some trade in furs, minerals and other considerable commodities."

Mr. Ralph does not appear to have a high opinion of the geographical attainments of the readers of *Harper's* or he would not have stated that "England had offered £20,000 reward to whosoever should find the bothersome passage to the southern seas *via the North Pole*" (!) The Act, 18 Geo. ii, Cap 17, A. D., 1745, offered that reward to any of His Majesty's subjects who should find the passage "through Hudson's Straights to the Western and Southern Ocean of America," and the framers of the statute apparently realized the fact, differing in this respect

TOWN OF CARBERRY, MANITOBA, IN 1891.



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from Mr. Ralph, that a vast expanse of territory lies between Hudson's Straits and the Pole; and by a subsequent enactment a special reward of £5,000 was offered to any one who should approach within one degree of the same.

There is no "novelty in the suggestion" given on page 378 that the men of the Company should be employed in the search for the North Pole, and "the interest it may excite" will not be perceptible as any one at all familiar with Arctic exploration well knows that the value of the Company's officers and men in this connection has been recognized for generations.

Speaking of the officers of the Company, it might be as well to state that Sir Donald Smith is *not* the president as there is no such officer. He is the governor of the Company. Mr. Wrigley is not now the commissioner, he has been succeeded by Mr. C. C. Chipman since Mr. Ralph was here.

The statement on page 374 that "by the time the Englishmen established themselves on Hudson's Bay individual Frenchmen and half-breeds had penetrated the country still further west . . . (and) . . . fitted out by the merchants of Canada pursued the fur trade, etc., is pure fiction and the unfortunate creation of Mr. Ralph, who alone, not omitting the bitter partisans of the French and the claims of the celebrated Sir Alex. Mackenzie himself, is bold enough to advance such a preposterous proposition. His assertion that "in a hundred years (1770) they (the H. B. Co.) were no deeper in the country than at first (on the shores of Hudson's Bay), excepting as they extended their little system of forts or 'factories' up and down and on either side of Hudson and James Bays," is not in accordance with the facts. The company had established and occupied, more or less intermittently according to the exigencies of the fur trade, Brunswick House up the Moose River in 1730; Henley House, about 1744, some 150 or 200 miles up the Albany River; Flamborough Factory, before 1750, about the same distance up the Hayes River; and, about 1740-50, apparently, a fort at Split Lake, and Fort Nelson far up the Churchill River.

Mr. Ralph is still more unfortunate when he says that "as early as 1731 M.

Vareennes de la Verandrye, licensed by the Canadian Government as a trader, penetrated the west as far as the Rockies, leading Sir Alexander Mackenzie to that extent by more than sixty years." Verandrye did not even reach the Lake of the Woods till 1732 and never saw the Rocky Mountains; in fact he died in the attempt to reach them in 1749.

Two of his sons had, however, accomplished this great design in 1742-3, via the Missouri, eleven years after the date erroneously assigned to the father.

What does the writer mean by saying that the "brifty French capitalists and Scotch merchants of *Upper Canada*" formed the North-West Company in 1783? Really, he ought to know that those canny princes of the fur trade—the McGillivrays, Frobishers, McKenzies, Mac-tavishes, McKays, Grants, Camerons, Frasers, McDonalds, etc., were all of Montreal and had nothing to do with the Upper Canadian merchants. The remark that the "French crown had been first in the field with a royal charter" (p. 384) must be assumed to be jocular, as it is difficult to believe that any one would have the hardihood to set up claims in 1818 under the defunct and preposterous charter of the Hundred Associates conferred by Cardinal Richelieu on the 29th of April, 1627. Sir Alexander McKenzie never so much as hinted at any such a right, even if that charter had been in operation it differed most materially from that of the Hudson's Bay Company.

The royal license referred to on page 391 as expiring in 1838 was renewed for twenty-one, not twenty years. Consequently it did not "expire" in 1858, but so far as British Columbia was concerned it was revoked on September 2nd of that year. As regards the rest of the territories it lapsed by effluxion of time in 1859, the Company refusing to accept the short renewal of it which was offered them.

It would be interesting to know on what foundation rests the statement that "at first the officers and men were nearly all from the Orkney islands," so far as the officers are concerned. It is probably correct as regards the men, and more probably incorrect as regards their superiors, who were almost exclusively

English and Scotch, as distinguished from Orkney-men, i.e., if any reliance can be placed on names.

Our writer, page 384, says that Lord Selkirk "held up the opposition to the world as profiting upon (*sic*) the weakness of the Indians by giving them alcohol, yet he ordered distilleries set up (*sic*) in his colony afterwards, saying, 'We grant the trade is iniquitous, but if we don't carry it on others will; so we may as well put the guineas in our own pockets.'"

This is a very grave charge to make against such a nobleman, one whose name is justly revered in this country, and before he can be reduced to the degrading position of a rum-seller to the Indians, Mr. Ralph will have to produce his authority. On the very face of his words it looks as though he had confused the settlers with the Indians. There is a wide difference between allowing the colonists to make liquors for their own use and "ordering" distilleries to be set up for the purpose of nefarious traffic with the natives. Even the Earl's grants of lands to the colonists contained clauses restraining the sale of spirits to the Indians. The statement that, on hearing of the troubles at Red River, "Lord Selkirk came with all speed, reaching Canada in 1817" is, as might be expected, inaccurate. He had been there, with his family, since the autumn of 1815. Mr. Ralph is, however, correct in stating that Canada "was now (1817) an *English colony*," but this piece of information, while it shows careful attention to details, yet is not calculated to make anyone unnecessarily enthusiastic over the writer's knowledge of Canadian history as unfortunately he apparently has never heard of the Treaty of Paris.

It sounds well, doubtless, to refer to the "sumptuous governors" of the Hudson's Bay Company and the "little putty-pipe cannon" of their forts, but then facts are stubborn things, and here, for instance, is the description of Fort Prince of Wales, from a resident at the time it was taken by La Perouse in August, 1782, which explodes the "putty-pipe" pleasantries: "The Fort at this time mounted forty-two cannon, six, twelve, and twenty-four pounders, was provided

"with ammunition in great plenty and the Factory was not in immediate want of provisions of any kind It was built of the strongest materials, its walls were of great thickness, and very durable, it having been forty years in building, and attended with great expense to the company."

And here is York Fort in the same year: "The defence of York Fort consisted of thirteen cannon, twelve and nine pounders, which formed a half moon battery in the front of the Factory On the ramparts were twelve swivel guns mounted on carriages Every kind of small arms were in plenty and good condition within the Fort."

Not bad fortresses, one would think, for the desolate shores of Hudson's Bay, and provided these works were manned by stout hearts—which they were not—well able to give a good account of any enemy who ventured into that inland sea.

The allegation that Governor Miles McDonnell (formerly a captain in the Royal Canadian Volunteers) admitted that he had no warrant to style himself "captain" and "governor" is also contrary to fact. In the celebrated proclamation of Jan. 8, 1814, he was careful to recite that he had "been duly appointed Governor of Assiniboia," and signed his name as such, and he later asserted his gubernatorial status at the trials at Montreal, and on oath stated that "I had a commission as governor from the Hudson's Bay Company under the authority of their charter," and, "I had a commission appointing me Governor of the District of Ossiniboia, and it was in virtue of that commission that I acted in the Red River country."

The overplus trade of the Company, which appears to be something strange and underhand to Mr. Ralph, was a well recognized institution. It would be easy to quote authorities in support of the statement but one from a rival in trade will be sufficient. Long, the well-known Canadian trader states in his "Voyages and Travels," 1791, page 128: "It cannot be supposed that they (the company) are ignorant of this 'over plus trade,' or the means by which their servants obtain the advantages arising from it;

"if they are not, and no impartial person will suppose they are, they not only allow but approve of the conduct of their governors, from a conviction of its being beneficial to the interests of the company; a proper reward for the labors of their servants, or from some other motive, which because it is adopted by men so respectable, and so much above reproach, must be allowed to be wise and prudent."

We are also presented with a doleful picture of the harsh and cruel conduct of the company's governors towards the "trembling varlets," their servants. The same authority that we have quoted above, fortunately, knew some of Mr. Ralph's "trembling varlets," and this is the result of his enquiries on their condition.

* * * "By way of refuting the charge of 'cruelty and oppression,' I need only add, what none, I think, will deny, that they (the servants) have been so well satisfied with the conduct of their superiors that many of them have continued in the service more than twenty years. I believe upon the whole, it will appear that the conduct of the superiors at home and abroad, is perfectly consistent with the true interests of the Company, and that any other mode of behavior would tend to anarchy and confusion, and I must declare for my own part, that I never heard of that personal disgust which Mr. Robson (one of Ralph's witnesses) so much complains of, but have rather found an anxious solicitude to be employed in their service."

After what has gone before one almost expects the startling statement that Joseph La France "told his tales to Arthur Dobbs, who made a book of them!" It is enough to make that venerable writer turn in his grave to hear his scarce and valuable "Account of the countries, adjoining to Hudson's Bay," (1744) called a book of tales, and that because he devoted barely 17 pages to the journal of the "French Canadese Indian," as he quaintly terms him. Fie, Mr. Ralph, a book of tales! As the writer of an historical sketch on the Company you are ungenerous to your predecessor.

And then why branch off into that little irrelevant and speculative disquisi-

tion on the origin of the name Peace River, when you might have consulted the best and earliest authority, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, on the point? Here is his derivation:

"On the 13th October (1792) we came to the Peace Point, from which, according to the report of my interpreter, the river derives its name; it was the spot where the Knisteneaux and Beaver Indians settled their dispute; the real name of the river and point being that of the land which was the object of contention."

On page 386 will be found the following remarkable statements explanatory of the grant of Assiniboia to Lord Selkirk, by the Company, in 1811:

"No one, therefore, will wonder that when this grant was made several members of the governing committee resigned;" and "a queer development of the moment was a strong opposition from holders of Hudson's Bay stock, who were also owners in that Company's great rival, the North-West Company."

In regard to the first of the above assertions, Mr. Ralph is quite correct in saying that no one will wonder at the resignation of "several members of the governing committee" for the simple reason that no such resignation took place. Even the N. W. Co. did not make such a claim in their semi-official "Narrative;" presumably it was left for Mr. Ralph to make the discovery. In regard to the second it is regrettable, but none the less true, that the "queer development" does not develop, for the "strong opposition" on the part of certain H. B. C. stockholders was nothing more or less than a determined effort on the part of certain agents of the N. W. Co. to burke Lord Selkirk's enterprise by purchasing stock about forty-eight hours before the meeting; not long enough to entitle them to vote indeed at the general court of proprietors, but enough to give them an opportunity to make an insidious protest. This attempt is so well known and appreciated in this province, and is such "ancient history" that an apology is almost due for giving it even the slightest consideration. The familiar story of the cruel massacre of the estimable Governor Semple is told again, but space and inclination both pre-

vent animadversion on the writer's mode of dealing with this subject, except that it is wrong to speak of "factors" of the North-West Company, and misleading to say that all the employees of that company who were charged with crimes arising out of these disputes between the rival fur traders were acquitted, for the blood-thirsty De Reinhard was found guilty of the most foul and atrocious murder of his prisoner, Mr. Owen Keveny, and condemned to be hanged on the 8th June, 1818, though, for reasons too lengthy to be discussed here, he was subsequently pardoned, after languishing for several years in jail.

Passing over many minor inaccuracies, we have to face the blow which our history receives when we learn that "in 1871 all the colonies of Canada were celebrated (!)" and we have had hardly time to recover from this shock when we are practically annihilated by the lordly way in which Mr. Ralph, with a generosity born of an untrammelled mind, and an indifference to consequences equal to his generosity, bestows (in the wrong year) on the "Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay" no less than *one-half* of the fertile belt of Rupert's Land, though their deed of surrender only reserved to them *one-twentieth* of that noble inheritance.

Miscellaneous.

The truli brave man iz the won afrade off being kalled a koward.

Bald-headed truth shuld ware the curled wig of sweet circumlution.

Moral Reflexkshun—What shal it profit a man if he gane the hole world and lose his own soal?

The man who alweighs rememberz a favor and whoo never forgettz a frend, will pla first fiddle in the heavenli orchestra.

Munny will bi awl the luxuries off this world, but itt kant purchase a single necessity. Sho me the shop where they sel kontentment, luv, conscience, peace, and I'll sho you the necessities off life.

THE GREAT DIVIDER'S DIARY.—March

29th, '59.—Mudd Hen Holler haz fallen upon evil daza. The joious levity off its yooth iz past, the bad man iz kno moar, virchaw now occupies the first floor and the faro tables iz moved upp stares. Where once the roolet player sang his sireen song, the counter jumper hoppeth; and where once the ga revolver did revolve, the ginger ail kork poppeth. Az Sheakspeer sez, these air piping times off peec-. Our suckcess haz been our ruin. The sturdy miners, the horny-handed sun of to l, have awl been eucher-d owt of their mines by slick sitizens, and robbery is now kondukted according too the rules off kommerce. Lawyers and doctors hav arrived too komplette our finanshall and physical ruin. Slick Bill has yielded to the demands of morality, and haz put skreen doarz in front of his bar, and many of his customers have reformed, and keep a barrel off whiski in thare cellars, and patronize his plase kno moar. Drug stores have krept in and injured his trade. Deekons patronize the sody watter fountain and wink when tha sa tha will take sum off "the same." I am sadd, mi diari, but I see no ra off hoap. The town grows bigger and better everi da. We shal soon have policeman, a mayor and worst off all, a board of aldermen. Then, indeed, wil our kup be full.

The clever flatterer konvinces a man that he possesses virchaws that he knowz he hasn't got.—*The Great Divide*, Denver, Colorado.

Recently a girl in one of the public schools of this city was asked by her teacher to explain the difference between the words balance and remainder. Her answer was: "You can say 'A man lost his balance and fell,' but you cannot say 'A man lost his remainder and fell.'"

A FRIEND recently wanted to write a sketch of the wife of "Bill Nye," and wrote the humorist for Mrs. Nye's permission and some facts. "She objects, although I insisted," wrote the humorist, "and we had better let her off. She has always seemed to shrink from this sort of thing for years, and yet she weighs over 150 pounds to day."

WHEN the farmer speaks of working at the polls he does not mean labor in a bean patch.